William Penn in Pennsylvania

William Penn in 1696, by Francis Place.

WHEN William Penn left England on his first voyage to Pennsylvania, his head was full of visions and hopes for this new Land of Promise "six hundred miles nearer the sun." He wanted to see if he and his fellow Quakers could establish here a new society based on wider freedoms than the Old World knew; and he wanted also to see whether it was true, as he thought, that men and women were better and happier for this freedom. Believing good government to be part of God's plan for mankind, he called his venture a Holy Experiment.

He was in Pennsylvania only three and a half years. But from 1681, when he received the King's charter at the age of thirty-seven, to 1718, when he died, Pennsylvania was one of his chief preoccupations. The growth and well-being of his colony was based on a tradition of *religious toleration* and *freedom under law*, fundamental principles of American civil life. Thomas Jefferson called Penn "the greatest law-giver the world has produced."

Governor William Penn came to North America in 1682 and stayed for two years, returning only for another short stay from 1699 to 1701. Illness, financial worries, and threats to Pennsylvania's charter kept him from the tranquil enjoyment of his beautiful home on the Delaware River. Since he was in no position to take immediate charge of the government, it is remarkable that he was able to exert the influence he did on the development of the colony.

Penn was born on October 24, 1644. His father was a famous English admiral, Sir William Penn. Young William grew up during a stormy time of revolution and reaction in England. For a short time, he was a soldier, and so successful a one that he thought of making a career in the army. But, seeing the effects of violence and persecution, he was led to dream of a society in which war should have no place, and in which a man might freely worship according to his own conscience. He joined the Society of Friends (the Quakers), who were pacifists, and threw his energies with theirs into political battles for freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, and the right of trial by jury.

In 1681 there came a golden opportunity to make his dreams come true. King Charles II, out of "regard to the memorie and meritts of his late father," gave the younger Penn a huge tract of land in North America and named it, in honor of the Admiral, "Pennsilvania," or Penn's Woods.

The new proprietor advertised for settlers—"adventurers" he called them: farmers, day laborers, carpenters, masons, smiths, weavers, tailors, tanners, shoemakers, shipwrights, and, in addition, merchants who understood commerce, and men of administrative capacity to set the new community on its feet.

At the same time, to reassure the Swedish, Finnish, and Dutch settlers who were already in the Province, and who provided a sturdy base for its coming population, he sent letters bidding them not to be disturbed at the change of government. He was not a grasping and tyrannical governor, he said: and he promised them freedom: "You shall be governed by laws of your own making. . . ."

Penn delayed his departure for the New World for more than a year. He hoped to persuade his friend the Duke of York (soon to become King James II) to grant him title to the three counties of Delaware, lying south of Penn's original grant, which would guarantee an outlet to the sea. In late August, 1682, the Duke transferred his title to Penn, and within a few days Penn left for America. Sailing on a ship that was appropriately named the "Welcome," he made the voyage in comparatively good time. He arrived at New Castle in northern Delaware, October 27, 1682, less than two months after leaving England. The next day he

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sailed farther up the river to Upland, the most populous town in what became Pennsylvania. He soon renamed the town Chester, for the English city of the same name.

William Penn's first few weeks in the colony were busy ones indeed. One of the matters which he had to attend to right away was the arranging of a conference with Lord Baltimore, the proprietor of Maryland, on the boundary disputes between their two colonies. The charters granted to Penn and to Lord Baltimore were hopelessly in conflict. Lord Baltimore asserted that his charter properly included Delaware, and he also claimed so large a portion of southern Pennsylvania that the site chosen for Philadelphia would have gone to Maryland. Penn never succeeded in settling this dispute during his lifetime, and in fact it was never settled by anyone until the surveying of the Mason-Dixon line in 1763.

The boundary question did not stop Penn from taking great pride in the brand-new town of Philadelphia, which he inspected soon after landing at Chester. While Penn had been in England his agents had chosen the site for the new town and had laid it out in accordance with his directions. Penn, a man of classical learning, had called it Philadelphia, a name which he interpreted to mean "the city of brotherly love." Now, little more than a year old, the town was already beginning to show signs of the prosperity and culture that were to give it first rank among American cities in the later colonial period. Penn himself, describing his impressions of his first visit to the colony, hailed the new city with this eloquent passage: "And thou, *Philadelphia*, the virgin settlement of this province, named before thou wert born, what love, what care, what service, and what travail has there been, to bring thee forth. . . ." For the time being, however, Penn was not able to linger at Philadelphia; with his chief assistants he hurried down the river to New Castle for the opening of the first provincial court. He invited all those settlers with questions about land titles to be present at the next session of the court, and announced that until a provincial legislature could meet, the colonists would be governed by the laws of the province of New York wherever these did not conflict with English law.

In the area of Indian relations, Penn's Quaker principles were plainly stamped onto the life of the colony. Almost immediately after arriving, despite his multitude of other duties, he took steps to establish peaceful relations with the Indians. Although he had accepted title to his land from the English King, Penn respected the rights of the bronze-skinned people who had been living on it. He was careful to acquire the land from them by purchase, and to this end he and his agents held frequent conferences with the local Delaware chiefs and their retinue. He has described these scenes: the chief seated in the center, his council seated in a half-moon behind him, and beyond that another half-moon composed of all the other Indians of the community. Proceedings on both sides were grave and courteous. It was Penn's courtesy on these occasions, combined with his unfailing sense of fair play, that won the Indians' respect and affection. He left behind him a tradition of good feeling that saved Pennsylvania for seventy years from the disaster of an Indian war.

The painter Benjamin West has immortalized a treaty of friendship which, according to tradition, Penn made with the renowned Delaware chief Tamanend soon after his arrival in 1682. Common belief has this treaty—one which Voltaire said was "never sworn to and never broken"—taking place under the "Treaty Elm" at Shackamaxon, half a mile north of the center of Philadelphia. Whether the story is literally true or not, it does symbolize the determination of the peace-loving Quakers to deal justly with their neighbors.

Three weeks after his arrival Penn called for an election of representatives to the first provincial Assembly, which would meet with him in Chester early in December. These men convened on December 4 and stayed in session four days—long enough to pass several laws and to grant Pennsylvania citizenship both to the Delaware residents and to the few Swedes, Finns, and Dutchmen who had come to the area before the start of English colonization. This was the first of four sessions of the Assembly held during Penn's brief stay in North Ameriea, and the laws passed during those sessions embodied the humanitarian and tolerant spirit of Penn and his fellow Quakers.

Among the laws passed by the Assembly in 1682-83 were several which were accorded special status. These could not be changed except by agreement of the governor and six-sevenths of the members of the legislature. Heading the list of these fundamental statutes was Penn's law protecting freedom of conscience. Under this guarantee thousands of members of unpopular Christian sects were able to escape from the persecutions of the Old World. Unlike many people who have suffered restrictions on their freedoms, the Quakers had no wish to impose similar restrictions on others

The Slate Roof House. Penn's residence in Philadelphia, 1700; it was demolished in 1868.

once they had the power. The criminal code adopted by Penn and the Assembly was also indicative of the Quakers' idealism. Only two crimes, murder and treason, were made punishable by death. At that time the laws in England prescribed the death penalty for such offenses as housebreaking, highway robbery, and all other robberies of more than one shilling.

Between law-making, Indian councils, land sales, and boundary disputes, Penn's stay in America was a strenuous one. His wife Gulielma had stayed behind in England with their children, the plan being that they would join Penn in the colony as soon as possible. But Gulielma was destined never to cross the ocean. In 1684 Penn learned that Lord Baltimore was on his way back to England and would try to persuade the King to give Maryland the lands that were in dispute between the two colonies. Penn knew that he must also go back if he were not to lose a large portion of his land. A remark by one of Lord Baltimore's agents—that Penn's beloved Philadelphia was "one of the prettiest towns in Maryland"—could not have made Penn feel very happy. In August of 1684 he hurriedly left for England to protect his colony's interests. He was not to return for fifteen years.

The boundary quarrel dragged on interminably, and, although Penn was able to prevent a transfer of the disputed lands to Maryland, he did not succeed in gaining a clear title to them himself. Meanwhile, other events began to overshadow this argument. Penn's benefactor, James II, the former Duke of York, became King in 1685 and immediately began to make enemies with his harsh policies. Although he disagreed with the King on many points, and favored a much greater degree of popular rule than James would permit, Penn stayed loyal to their friendship. As a result, when the King's troubled reign was abruptly ended by the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, Penn came under suspicion from the new rulers, William and Mary. For nearly six years he was either in prison or in hiding. Then in 1694, when he had finally succeeded in clearing his name, his beloved wife Gulielma died after a lingering illness. That left Penn with the care of their three children as well as with pressing financial problems. Two years later he was married again, this time to Hannah Callowhill, an attractive and devout Quaker woman more than twenty-five years younger than himself. When next he returned to Pennsylvania it would be with Hannah.

Finally, Penn's desire to see the colony once again was reinforced by the demands of the British government. The Board of Trade, which supervised provincial affairs, had heard reports that the Pennsylvania government, in Penn's absence, was abetting the activities of pirates who preyed on ships off the Atlantic coast. Penn promised to return at once to look into the reports and to take swift action if it seemed to be justified. He landed at Philadelphia in early December of 1699, accompanied by Hannah and his grown daughter by the earlier marriage, Letitia. The piracy question was disposed of with little difficulty, and Penn was able to view with pride (and perhaps some bewilderment) the other changes in the colony. Philadelphia, "named before thou wert born," was a bustling little city with a population second only to Boston's in all of the New World. Pennsylvania was exporting such raw materials as lumber, furs, hemp, tobacco, iron, and copper and receiving high-quality British manufac-

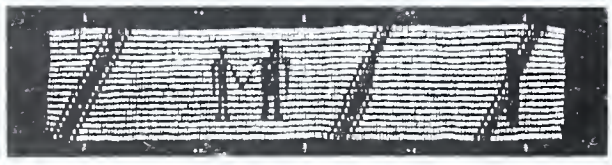
tured goods in exchange. The population of the colony as a whole was increasing so fast that, a year after his arrival, Penn obtained a deed from the Iroquois, or "Five Nations," for the lands adjoining the Susquehanna River that had belonged to the Susquehanna Indians.

As often as official business allowed, Penn retreated to the wilderness home he had created for his family. Pennsbury Manor was across the Delaware River from the present city of Trenton, New Jersey, some twenty-four miles north of Philadelphia. Here, in a home that was set in heavy woods and was conveniently accessible only by water, Penn spent many happy days. It was a large house, full of servants, handsome furniture, and good things for the dining table —for Penn, though deeply religious, was not an ascetic. He and his wife looked after the affairs of the house. From Pennsbury, as his letters disclose, he sent to town for such things as bricks, lime, locks, and nails, while she ordered chocolate, flour, bacon, coffee, cornmeal and (on one occasion) a "parlor bell." Such commodities were delivered by flatboat up the Delaware River. When they were not living at Pennsbury, the family stayed at the Slate Roof House, an ample Philadelphia dwelling owned by Samuel Carpenter. It was in this house that his son John Penn was born on January 29, 1700. The only one of Penn's children to be born in North America, John always carried the nickname of "the American."

Perhaps the most important achievement of William Penn's second stay in the colony was the adoption of a new frame of government, the Charter of Privileges, in October, 1701. This constitution, which lasted three-quarters of a century, or until the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, was a step in the direction of self-government for the colony. Although the governor retained his right to veto legislation, the elected Assembly gained the power to initiate bills, rather than merely to approve or reject those submitted to it by the governor and his council. The bell cast in 1751 to mark the fiftieth anniversity of the Charter of Privileges was engraved with the words, "Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof," from the Book of Levitieus, Chapter 25, Verse 10. Today known as the Liberty Bell, it hangs in Independence Hall in Philadelphia to commemorate the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Penn, during this visit, was concerned not only with the internal government of Pennsylvania but with the North American colonies as a whole. At a meeting with Governor Bellomont of New York and Governor Nicholson of Virginia in 1700 he got his brother officials to agree on a set of proposals for greatly increased co-operation among all the colonies. These plans were sent to the Board of Trade in London, but nothing was done about them. Unity among the colonies did not come until they had cut loose from Britain.

As on his first visit, Penn found himself unable to stay as long as he would have liked in the colony. A determined movement was on foot in Parliament to place Pennsylvania under the direct control of the Crown. Once again Penn had to hurry back to England. He sailed in November, 1701, shortly after he had signed the Charter of Privileges. Before leaving he also granted the request of the inhabitants of Delaware that they be allowed to separate from Pennsylvania. Although Penn succeeded in retaining his colony, the remainder of his life was filled with much unhappiness. One of his close associates had defrauded him of a vast amount of money, and Penn was tied up for years in the litigation that arose from this theft. By the time he emerged from this ordeal he was an elderly man whose health, especially after a severe stroke in 1712, would not permit another ocean voyage. He died on July 30, 1718, at the age of seventy-three. Except for two brief visits of less than two years each, William Penn had never had a chance to enjoy the colony for which he, more than anyone else, was responsible.



Wampum belt of friendship presented to Penn by Indians in a treaty. It is made of white and purple beads fashioned from clam shells.

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